Saint or Satanist? Joseph-Antoine Boullan and Satanism in Nineteenth-Century France

CHRISTIAN GIUDICE

In 1895, a young French author by the name of Henri Antoine Jules-Bois (or Jules Bois, 1868–1943) published a book that shocked and titillated the curiosity of occultists nationwide. The book was entitled *Le satanisme et la magie*, and depicted a scenario that would have startled its French readership: far from being a superstitious relic of the Middle Ages, according to Jules Bois, Satanism in France was as popular as it had ever been.

In another publication, *Les petites religions de Paris* ('The Minor Religions of Paris', 1894), Bois had penned a mesmerising overview of a secret Paris, tucked away from everyday life and bustling with adherents of the most peculiar forms of religiosity. Neopagans rubbed shoulders with Buddhists; neo-gnostics like Papus (1865–1916) and Joanny Bricaud (1881–1934) were on familiar terms with Isis worshippers such as Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918), one of the founders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

What strikes the reader even more, though, is the presence two different kinds of Devil worship within the same city. The first, the Satanists proper, 'have the same belief as Christians. They know that Lucifer, that Satan is the banished angel, the Lord of Evil, and the reasons why these people practise what they do and why they adore him are well known.'[1] They were perceived to be solitary practitioners who did not aim to destroy the Church and often acted for reasons of personal gain. The second group of Devil worshippers were known as the Luciferians, or Palladists, and were an alleged secret society that mirrored the Catholic Church.

The Luciferians were said to have an antipope, a clergy and a college of cardinals, as a parody of the Vatican. To them Lucifer was God, the prince of all that is good, and God was darkness. It was a *catholicisme à rebours*, a Catholicism against nature. Bois and his colleagues were sure that the real Catholic clergy had been infiltrated by Luciferians, as holy wafers and church paraphernalia had been reported stolen in many a church in Italy and France.

Palladism was revealed as a hoax perpetrated by Marie Joseph Gabriel Antoine Jogand-Pagès, better known as Léo Taxil (1854–1907). A journalist always looking for the next scandal, Taxil was well known for his anti-Catholic sentiments. His early works rivalled those of the Marquis de Sade in blasphemy: *La bible amusante* ('The Amusing Bible', 1882) and *Les débauches d'un confesseur* ('The Debaucheries of a Confessor', 1884).

In 1885, in what went down in history as the Taxil hoax, the author renounced his wicked past and converted to Catholicism. He wrote virulent anti-Masonic propaganda, accusing lodges of worshipping the Devil and being infiltrated by Palladists. When asked to explain some incongruities in his writings, he promised to explain all: on 19 April 1897, in front of an impressive audience, he announced that everything since 1885 had been a carefully elaborated prank. The Parisian audience was so incensed that Taxil avoided being lynched thanks only to the swift intervention of the police. Soon after, he left Paris, never to return, and he died in Sceaux in 1907.

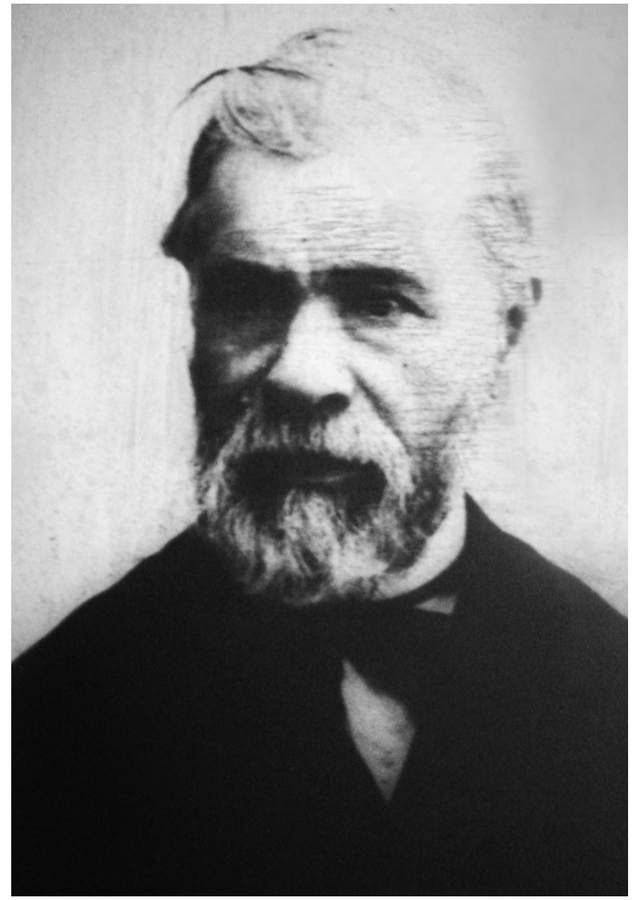
It seems clear, reading Bois's books and accounts of the Taxil hoax, that nineteenth-century France took allegations of dealings with Satan very seriously. A member of the clergy implicated in such rumours was bound to suffer serious repercussions from the Church and from society at large.

Such fears, such paranoia, would play a great role in the life of Joseph-Antoine Boullan (1824–93), a Roman Catholic priest with unorthodox ideas, who lived during the Luciferian craze of the late nineteenth century.

Boullan's Early Life

Born in Saint-Porquier, Joseph-Antoine Boullan spent a short period in a Catholic seminary then was sent to Rome to pursue his theological studies, where he graduated *cum laude* with a doctorate in theology. He joined the Missionnaires du Précieux Sang (Missionaries of the Precious Blood), who believed in their role as cleansers of people's sins through self-flagellation. After each mass, Boullan and his brothers violently flagellated themselves in front of the gathered people. Bricaud writes that Boullan would reminisce about those bloody flagellations with great fondness.

On his return to France in 1851, Boullan devoted his free time to the study of Christian mystics, and in 1853 he translated into French a work by Bonaventure Amedeo de Cesare as *Vie divine de la Très-Sainte Vierge Marie* ('Divine Life of the Most Holy Virgin Mary'). The book caused a scandal in the clergy because of Boullan's introduction, in which he depicted mysticism in the light of the fashionable occult phenomena of magnetism and Spiritualism. He writes: 'The little that we have said will suffice to draw the attention



of the clergy and set them to study these marvels of grace in depth. Through facing the phenomena of magnetism and of the neo-spiritualism that is bursting imto the world, they will better understand truth and error'.[2]

Throughout the 1850s, while still writing theological tracts and translating works by the mystics of the past, Boullan's interest was

*fig.*1. Portrait of the Abbé Boullan, undated. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

mostly engaged with the supernatural and the extraordinary. 1855 would be a memorable year for Boullan, for it was the year of his meeting with Sister Adèle Chevalier. Chevalier claimed to have visions and revelations from angels and the Virgin Mary, and to have been miraculously cured of blindness and lung congestion through the intervention of Notre-Dame de la Salette. A clerical investigation of the alleged miracle concluded: 'I do not hesitate to believe in a supernatural intervention of the mother of God.'[3] Since her recovery, Chevalier reported frequent visions and revelations from a mysterious voice.

The Abbé Boullan was called because of his expertise in the supernatural and mystical, and after only one day he was convinced of the divine nature of Chevalier's revelations. The instructions she received through the mysterious voice explained to her that the souls of men had to be repaired if they were to have any chance of reaching heaven.

The concept of soul repair was not new in French mysticism, and Martines de Pasqually (1727?–74) almost a hundred years earlier had written a *Traité de la réintégration des êtres* ('Treatise on the Reintegration of Beings'). While Pasqually's method was couched in the secrecy of Masonic structures and demanded celibacy, Boullan's approach would be rather different. He and Chevalier started what they called the Work of Repairing Souls. In 1857 he published a popular booklet entitled *La véritable réparation, ou l'âme réparatrice par les saintes larmes de Jésus et de Marie* ('The True Repair, or the repairing soul through the holy tears of Jesus and Mary'). Boullan also travelled to Rome to explain his plans to Pope Pius IX, and although he did not meet the pope in person, he did receive encouragement for his venture.

Once he returned to Paris, Sister Adèle Chevalier communicated that she had received orders from the Holy Virgin to create the Oeuvre de la Réparation de l'Âme. In 1859 the order settled in Bellevue, and Boullan started publishing a journal in which, alongside articles on the Roman Church and Christian mysticism, he promoted his order and promulgated his ideas on how to achieve the repairing of a soul.

The abbé and Sister Chevalier's mission grew increasingly famous. Lay people and clergy alike constantly asked the two for the favour of the Holy Mary. But rumours of unorthodox practices started circulating. Charles Sauvestre, in his *Les congrégations religieuses dévoilées* ('The Religious Congregations Unveiled', 1879), claimed that the abbé, in order to exorcise a sister who had fallen prey to demonic influence, spat in her mouth; that someone else was advised to drink the abbé's urine mixed with Sister Chevalier's; and that yet another person was asked to wear poultices made of faeces.

In 1865, accused of fraud and public indecency, the two were summoned to Paris. The charges of public indecency were dropped, but they were convicted of swindling and spent three years in jail. Once out, the abbé continued his mission of saving souls and helping the sick. But in 1875, in the face of criticism from high-ranking members of the French clergy, he decided to leave the Church for ever. Boullan was now a defrocked priest.

Boullan and Vintras, John the Baptist and Elijah

Three figures profoundly influenced Boullan's reputation. The first was Adèle Chevalier; the second, Pierre-Michel-Eugène Vintras (1807–75).

Born to poor but pious parents in 1807, Vintras was highly intelligent and by the late 1830s rose to become a manager of a cardboard box factory. In the early 1840s he claimed to have begun hearing the voices of the Archangel Michael, the Virgin Mary and St Joseph, all three of whom urged him to preach a new gospel to bring France back to its monarchic glory days, and save the world from impending extinction.

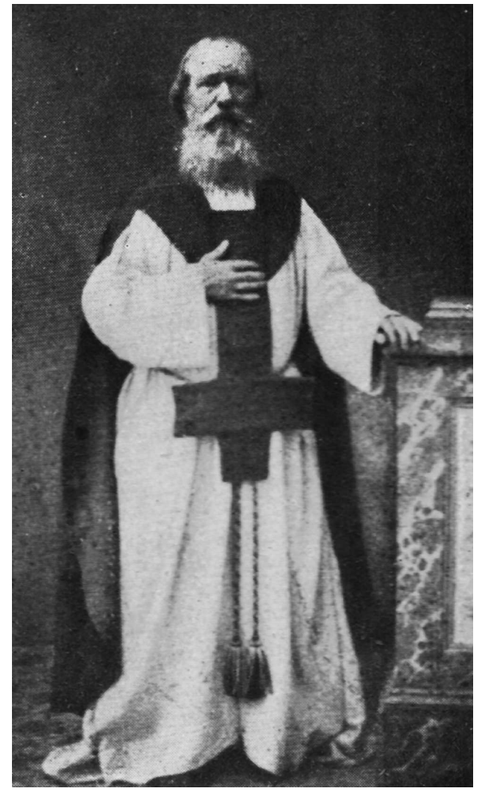
Vintras founded a movement called the Oeuvre de la Miséricorde (Work of Mercy). Joanny Bricaud writes: 'He was without doubt the most extraordinary mystical figure of the nineteenth century. His life was strange.'[4] What an understatement this has proven to be. With his natural charisma he attracted a vast number of followers, including members of the clergy. In a ramshackle oratory created in the cardboard box factory, Vintras preached to his followers about the third revelation and the beginning of a new age, the Age of the Paraclete, or consoler. And Vintras had proofs of the validity of his visions. Wine would mysteriously materialise in his chalice and the holy hosts were marked by bleeding stigmata – each time Vintras would raise them for the congregation to see.

On 13 August 1875, an excited Boullan introduced himself to Vintras. The two exchanged views on the miracles and on the life of previous visionary mystics. On 26 August, Vintras was in Paris, and gave Boullan the gift of a holy wafer on which a chalice, a heart and two letters *A* were marked in blood. These were the only two meetings between the two men, but they made a huge impression on Boullan.

Vintras fought Satanists, too. Jules Bois in *Le satanisme et la magie* gives an account of him projecting his astral body to a basement in Paris, where Satanists were invoking the Devil for some 'petty reason'. Vintras thwarted the evil ritual by his mere astral presence. Of the three Satanists, a young woman was rendered unconscious and started writhing uncontrollably, while the older priest felt his body failing him and his tongue unable to utter a word.

Vintras believed he was the new Elijah; Boullan had a vision indicating he had been nominated John the Baptist, Elijah's successor. Most of Vintras's supporters did not believe Boullan's claim and called him a charlatan. Boullan nevertheless established himself in Lyon, where his few followers helped him create a compound where they could safely practise his rituals for reforming souls, rituals inspired by Vintras's theories.

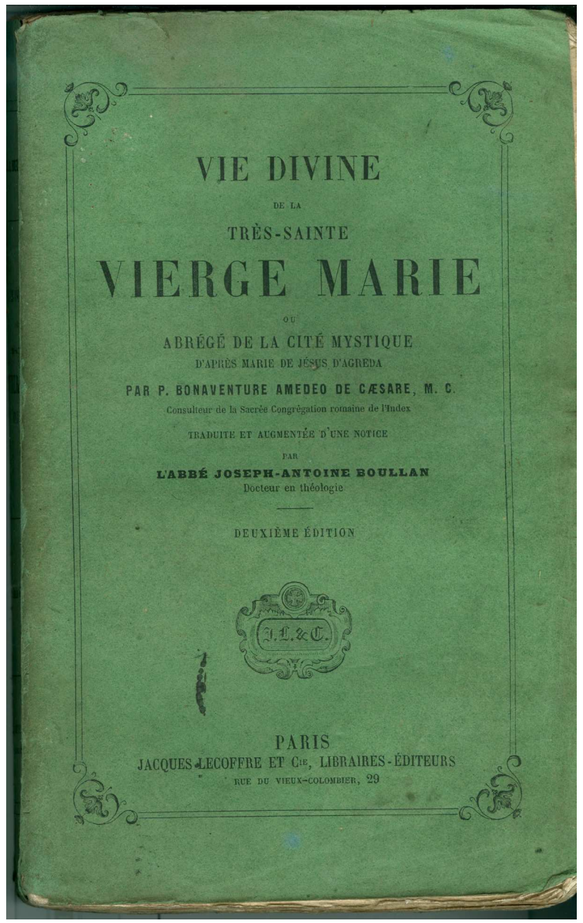
His most notable follower was Mme Julie Thibault (1839–1907), a woman permanently clad in cheap black clothing with a tin crucifix around her neck. In her youth she had walked across France to visit all the greatest sites dedicated to the Virgin



Mary; after Vintras's death she was devotedly at the side of Abbé Boullan. She referred to herself as a priestess of Mary.

She and Boullan foretold the fall of the Roman papacy and advanced a female pontificate, which the two called Marisiaque du Carmel. They published a fifty-page booklet of prayers, rituals and offerings for the small congregation of followers. In another manuscript pamphlet, *Le sacrifice de la gloire divine* ('The Sacrifice of Divine Glory', 1880), Boullan explained his mission more clearly: 'Real Love, whatever happens in heaven or on earth, touches all,

3. Portrait of Pierre-Michel-Eugène Vintras, in M. Garçon, *Vintras hérésiarque et prophète*, Paris, 1928.



justifies all, sanctifies all. We must be the great priests of love, the Delegates of all the loving powers of Divinity, so we may rise above all spheres.'

Boullan in Theory and Practice

Boullan developed a body of rituals and doctrine and a thesis of a new age of love.

In the Age of the Paraclete, Boullan asserted, all beings had a presence of the Holy Ghost in them. Only the Holy Ghost could start the process that would repair the souls and bring them to their primordial, Edenic state. Boullan and his followers felt that theirs was a double mission: to seek not only a personal but a collective reintegration, helping those beings that had not yet fully developed to go further and further in their voyage towards redemption.

To fully understand how Boullan imagined this was achieved, we must examine his most secret teachings. According to the abbé, God had already planned the evolution of the world before creating Adam, and once man and woman were created, he had imposed on them the sacred duty to go and multiply. But if that were the case, how could God ever have permitted mankind to become as debased and immoral as it was in nineteenth-century France?

Boullan had an answer: in the Age of the Paraclete, reproductive organs had been purified in order to create beings untainted by original sin. To do the same, man must elevate his mind to the same plane of existence as God's mind through prayers and devotion; only then could he make a sanctified use of the reproductive organs.

Bricaud notes that Boullan often made use of a verse from the prophet Isaiah, to be interpreted by Kabbalistic means: 'I will make a gift to those who possess an agreeable essence and are strong in their alliance with me, I will grant them . . . a ministry and a generation that will be superior even to the joy of having given to earth sons and daughters, for this generation will never die.'[5] In his *Déclaration concernant les sept mystères* ('Declaration regarding the Seven Mysteries', 1881), Boullan is even clearer: 'The fall from Eden happened because of a reprehensible act of love, [but our Law of Union] happens by acts of love carried out in a religious fashion, that could and should carry out the Redemption of Humanity.'

Sexual intercourse approached religiously is to Boullan the sacrament of all sacraments. His followers could choose to unite in love with higher spirits and saints, to individually ascend closer and closer to God. Equally, they might unite with lower, elemental beings, in order to help them evolve. The former was called 'union by wisdom', the latter 'union by charity'.

Two fully initiated followers of Boullan could also unite with one another. Combining semen and vaginal fluids, they would produce a *ferment de vie*, akin to the alchemical elixir. This sexual act was called *relations de vie*. People at this spiritual level were above 'the laws of marriage established for society', as they followed transcendent divine laws.

Enter de Guaïta

Once again, Boullan began to attract negative attention from both sceptics and clergy. From 1885, he made every effort to reveal to the wider world his theories on the redemption of mankind. And to do this he sought contacts within the occult milieu.

He started with one of the most famous Parisian occult savants: Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveydre (1842–1909). The marquis, despite the mediation of a mutual friend in the clergy, refused to meet Boullan, whose reputation was deplorable among most of the occult intelligentsia.

Having failed with Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, Boullan entered into a correspondence with the young founder of the Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix, Stanislas de Guaïta (1861–97). De Guaïta was a poet and an expert in esoteric subjects, and his books were widely read throughout France. His poetry collections, dense with occult symbolism, *La muse noir* (1883) and *Rosa mystica* (1885), had garnered him fame that reached outside the small occultist circles of Paris. His non-fiction books such as *Essais de sciences maudites* ('Essays on Accursed Knowledge', 1890), which included a dossier on contemporary Satanism, were also well known.

When de Guaïta wrote back to him, Boullan must have thought he had struck gold, capturing the interest of one of the most celebrated occultists of his day. In 1886, de Guaïta visited Boullan in Lyon, and the two had long talks about repairing souls. De Guaïta was deterred, however, when Boullan started hinting at secret sexual procedures. When he left, he did assure Boullan that his stay with him had enriched his occult lore. But in 1887 de Guaïta met with his fellow occultist Oswald Wirth (1860–1943) and the two decided to expose Boullan's impious activities. Wirth told de Guaïta that Boullan had fathered two babies with Adèle Chevalier, babies who, according to rumour, had been sacrificed to Satan.

The two occultists devised a daring plan to bring down Boullan. Wirth, who had been corresponding with him since 1885, played along in his role of devout follower. He wrote to the abbé that he had had a vision of sexual intercourse for the generation of higher beings (repeating what he had heard Boullan secretly advocated). Because the letter detailed his practices so perfectly, Boullan invited Wirth to Lyon. He promised he would have a sexual initiation and a place among the most prominent males in his group. A couple of days later, a letter signed by three young women initiates, and countersigned by their mother and the abbé, invited Wirth to reach Lyon quickly, since they had 'prayed so much to be granted an initiate like you to work with'.

Now Wirth had all the proof he needed, and declined the offer. He handed over the correspondence to his accomplice, de Guaïta. The evidence of misconduct among Boullan's followers was plentiful. De Guaïta set up a tribunal to prosecute the unfrocked priest and his followers. On 23 May 1887, Boullan was branded a sorcerer and the founder of a despicable sect.

De Guaïta proceeded to publish some of Wirth's correspondence with the abbé in his *Temple de Satan*: 'This doctrine was to lead to boundless promiscuity, total lack of shame, to incest, bestiality, and lastly to incubism . . . raised to the status of meritorious, sacramental actions, inherent in worship.'[6] By the late 1880s, Boullan's role as a prophet of a new age had been seriously undermined. But things weren't over yet.

*fig.*4. Joseph-Antoine Boullan's translation of *Vie divine de la Tres-Sainte Vierge Marie*, Paris: Jacques Lecoffre, [1872]

Huysmans, *Là-bas* and Boullan: the Battle of Occultists

Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907) was a novelist whose famed work *À rebours* ('Against the Grain', 1884) had been followed by lesser but still popular works. In 1890, Huysmans, who had frequented occultist and Spiritualist circles, decided to write a novel on the subject of Satanism. The work would span from the life of Gilles de Rais, alleged Satanist and child killer and inspiration for the folk tale 'Bluebeard', to contemporary France and its Satanic milieu. His aim was to rebel against Émile Zola's naturalism and portray occultist themes as real and still existing in the 1890s.

In order to learn more about Satanism in contemporary France, Huysmans sought out someone with knowledge of the field. He heard of Boullan in the Parisian occult scene, hailed by some as a saint who had cured many in miraculous ways, deplored by others, who considered him to be in league with the Devil himself. The author promptly wrote to the abbé, and days later a reply arrived, in which Boullan assured Huysmans that he had documents that would make his book 'a monument of nineteenth-century history'. Moreover, Boullan wrote that 'In the clergy, Satanism is bigger than you can possibly imagine. I will make sure you are convinced of this. This because I maintain that contemporary Satanism is more knowledgeable, more cultivated than in the Middle Ages; it is practised in Rome and especially in Paris, Lyon, Châlons in France, and in Bruges in Belgium.'[7]

Following Huysmans's and Boullan's correspondence, magical attacks were made against both of them, Mme Thibault being sure of de Guaïta's involvement, amongst other Parisian occultists. Huysmans wrote more than once of how he was saved from evil influences by Boullan's and Mme Thibault's magical efforts. At the same time, his stance towards the occultists who rallied around de Guaïta and accused the abbé of infamous practices became more and more belligerent. On 4 January 1893, Boullan, already suffering heart problems, began having trouble breathing and felt a great weight on his chest. He asked Mme Thibault for a drop of his elixir but its power was not enough, and after a short period of agony the abbé died in his bed. Mme Thibault wrote to Huysmans: 'He died a saint and martyr: his whole life was nothing but ordeals and suffering, in the sixteen years and more that I knew him.' Later she would describe to Huysmans how the body of the abbé showed no signs of decay in the days before its burial and how the abbé looked like a man asleep with no shame for his actions in life.

The death of Boullan had repercussions in the press that would involve many of the key figures mentioned in this article. *L'Éclair* started the offensive on 7 January, with the headline 'Death of a clergyman who celebrated black masses.' In the mean time, Huysmans published *Là-bas*, in which the benevolent character Dr Johannes, clearly inspired by Boullan, is portrayed as a positive representative of an otherwise corrupt world. Jules Bois, in the pages of *Gil Blas*, was less subtle: he openly and harshly accused de Guaïta of having murdered Boullan through black magic. In the edition of 9 January 1893, he wrote: 'I think I should relate the facts; the strange feeling that Boullan had; the visions of Mme Thibault and M. Misme: the attacks appear to be without a doubt of Rosicrucian origin, Wirth, Péladan, de Guaïta, against this man who has died.' Huysmans, through connections with journalists at *Le Figaro*, chipped in: 'It is indisputable that de Guaïta and Péladan practise black magic daily . . . Everything was done to kill my poor friend Boullan with a supreme curse.'

Huysmans's novel's success helped clear the abbé's tainted reputation: in the thinly veiled guise of Dr Johannes, Boullan is a benevolent figure, knowledgeable in the black arts but devoted to helping his fellow men. Yet rumours of his alleged Satanic debaucheries still circulated in 1913, when Joanny Bricaud published a slim volume dedicated to the life of Joseph-Antoine Boullan.

Many questions remain unanswered. Was Abbé Boullan really a Satanist, who practised his sexual rites for the sheer satisfaction of the senses? Or was he, as Mme Thibault and Huysmans thought, a misunderstood saint, with ideas ahead of his time? Bricaud writes that later, in the last years of his life, after having converted to Catholicism, Huysmans had confided to a select few that Boullan actually was a Satanist, and projected upon the Paris Rosicrucians his blasphemous deeds. This is just hearsay, however, and leaves open the question whether Abbé Joseph-Antoine Boullan was saint or Satanist.

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NOTES

1 Bois, *Le satanisme et la magie*, p. xx.
2 Boullan (tr.), *Vie divine*, p. 20.
3 Bricaud, *L'Abbé Boullan*, p. 14.
4 Bricaud, *L'Abbé Boullan*, p. 27.
5 Bricaud, *L'Abbé Boullan*, p. 49.
6 De Guaïta, *Le serpent de la Genèse*, p. 454.
7 Quoted in Bricaud, *L'Abbé Boullan*, p. 70.